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When Governance Networks Become the Agenda

Lasse Gerrits & Stefan Verweij

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Book Review

Erik-Hans Klijn and Joop Koppenjan, Governance Networks in the Public Sector (London, Routledge, 2016) 360 pp., \$59.95, paperback, ISBN 9780415707015.

Later this year, Deutsche Bahn, the German railway infrastructure provider, will finish its massive ‘Germany Unity Transport Project 8’, a multi-billion Euro endeavor to connect Berlin and Munich by means of a high-speed railway link. To the humble city of Bamberg, positioned between Berlin and Munich, the railway can provide an enormous boost for its tourism. Surely, Deutsche Bahn would consider adding Bamberg to its project, right? Well, not for nothing. Upgrading the infrastructure around Bamberg is considered more costly than building a new track around the city. If the Bamberg city council would like its city to be internationally connected, it would have to pay up. Various interest groups, however, do not want the city to pay for upgrading the infrastructure that is owned by Deutsche Bahn. Also, they are not in favor of tracks around the city. The city’s next trick is then to contact its representatives in Berlin to pull the right strings in the national Ministry of Transport in order to steer the discussion favorably.

This case demonstrates the argument for governance networks in a nutshell: multiple and different kinds of actors have to operate in networks because of the need to exchange resources so as to achieve certain (shared) goals. The study of governance networks has taken such a flight that it has become increasingly hard to think of issues in public administration or public policy outside of the idiom and concepts of governance theories. Or, to put it differently, governance networks have moved from a niche within our domain to become mainstream or common knowledge. Erik-Hans Klijn and Joop Koppenjan have played an important role in popularizing the central concepts of governance networks, starting with the edited volume ‘Managing Complex Networks: Strategies for the Public Sector’ (Kickert, Klijn, and Koppenjan 1997). In 2004, they followed-up with a monograph in which they considered the implications of governance networks for the management of such networks. The central question for that book was: “how can the substantive, strategic and institutional uncertainties that are so characteristic of complex societal issues be

analyzed and managed in a way that is appropriate, given the features of these uncertainties and the sources from which they stem?” (2004, 15).

The current book can be considered a spiritual successor to the 2004 title, though the scope has somewhat changed. The central question now reads: “how can the substantive, strategic, and institutional complexities that characterize governance networks be analyzed and managed in an effective, democratically legitimate, and accountable way, given the features of these complexities, and the sources from which they stem?” (2016, 16). Compared to their previous book, the current one shows a stronger emphasis on “complexities” instead of “uncertainties”, and “appropriately” is now more precisely defined as “effective, democratically legitimate, and accountable”. The book is structured along the three types of complexity mentioned in the main question. Part 1 of the book delves into the three complexities and Part 2 discusses how they can be managed. The chapters in the third part of the book discuss effectiveness, democracy, and accountability in networks. While the previous book was mainly an academic one that could be used in education, the current one is explicitly targeted at students.

If anything, the book will hold up as a reference guide. Klijn and Koppenjan’s knowledge and overview of the field is extensive and there is a reference for each concept, idea, theory, or hypothesis. It reminded us of Parson’s ‘Public Policy’ (1995), a book that was extremely useful for students such as us who needed to see who wrote what. We cannot give enough praise to Klijn and Koppenjan’s efforts that have gone into structuring the many ideas and strands within the governance network literature. In a world where everything has become ‘governance’, a guide such as this one is more than welcome, even though it is sometimes hard to tell the various differences between concepts apart. Not every topic can be addressed but the authors do a very good job of describing the scope of the book. This is not to say that the authors have restricted themselves severely though; the book still covers a wide range of topics. Naturally, the book also suffers from Parson’s problem, which is that large chunks of the text read like bullet lists or a menu of ‘what is available in literature’. Such lists, though useful, make it unnecessarily hard to keep track of the main narrative.

That narrative, then, may be summarized as follows: governance networks are here to stay, government officials (and practically everyone) should better learn how these networks operate, and how to influence them in order to have it your way. Of course, such a crude summary does not do full justice to the book but it does grasp the recurring theme. This theme presents us with a number of problems. Firstly, it remains unclear who are being addressed by the book’s narrative. Chapter 7 addresses the reader as the ‘process manager’ and provides a job description of sorts (p. 172 ff.), but we could not really figure out who the process manager actually is. Is this a civil servant; a consultant; a politician; a volunteer?

Secondly, the price of all well-intended pieces of advice on managing governance networks is that it feels as if the imaginary process manager is turned into a kind of demi-god, who descends on people to make them work together for the greater good (see the discussion on p. 174). This is not going to happen in reality.

Civil servants and politicians have a clear stake in the game and will act accordingly. Although consultants may not have a substantive stake, they have limited credibility (being ‘as good as their last project’), not to mention having a stake in prolonging the work for the sake of getting more mileage out of it for the company. Also, there is actually little conclusive evidence of whether the process management directives will return the desired results. The authors are aware of this and the argument is watered-down by inserting many ‘may’s and ‘could’s’, which does not add to the clarity required from a textbook.

Thirdly, one cannot escape the impression that the insights and lessons apply to countries with like-minded governance habits and structures such as Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States; and even between these countries differences will still be found. So what about the example from Bamberg? Yes, the actors in that game are linked in networks but much of the decision-making is highly formalized and is being ruled by planning laws cast in concrete. One will be hard-pressed to find a process manager trying to bring everyone together over the Bamberg railway link.

This takes us to our main bones of contention. There is an underlying normative agenda or current that shapes the book’s arguments. Network governance is not just there to stay, the authors imply, it is also a fundamentally good thing that this is so. The idea that actors need to connect because of the exchange of resources slowly morphs into the idea that actors need to cooperate because cooperation is better for society than other modes of governing. It is going to be hard to argue against a fluffy concept such as ‘cooperation’ but we believe the jury is still out on whether it really is ‘good’.

Our second main concern is that the book, while theoretically rich, lacks in the empirical and methodological departments. Yes, the authors use many examples – often in the shape of text boxes – but it does not always convince. For example, the case of water management in New York in Chapter 6 could have been slotted, easily and without alteration, into other chapters; or it could have been left out altogether. We would have preferred to see both more in-depth descriptions as well as comparative efforts. On the basis of the current book, it is still hard to assess the extent to which the ideas and suggestions are proven to work. Something that works in a particular case in the Netherlands does not necessarily work in the United States – let alone China or South Africa. The authors should have taken stock of the huge body of research emerging around more advanced methods such as Social Network Analysis and Dynamic Network Analysis. These methods are undergoing massive advancements and it is necessary for an ambitious book such as Klijn and Koppenjan’s to account for that debate. For example, which types of structures (density, in-betweenness, etcetera) are more effective in delivering certain services or goods; are such structures similar, the same or different between cases that produce the same outcomes; at what point do central nodes get overwhelmed and stop being effective brokers? And where are the tensor networks where it is recognized that two or more actors can have multiple and contradictory relationships? Method-wise, we can take account of such tensions but the book doesn’t.

This being an academic review, it is only natural that we point at the weaknesses. Still, Klijn and Koppenjan have delivered a conceptually rich textbook on governance networks and there can be no doubt that many students will find it immensely useful when studying the big theme that is governance. In fact, in their book, governance networks have become the agenda, and network governance is not only something one can observe, it is also considered something worth aiming for. If that is the case, we still need to make big steps in further testing and critically researching the main ideas and assumptions using novel and more sophisticated methods. That also needs to be part of the agenda, next to the normative stance that governance is good.

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